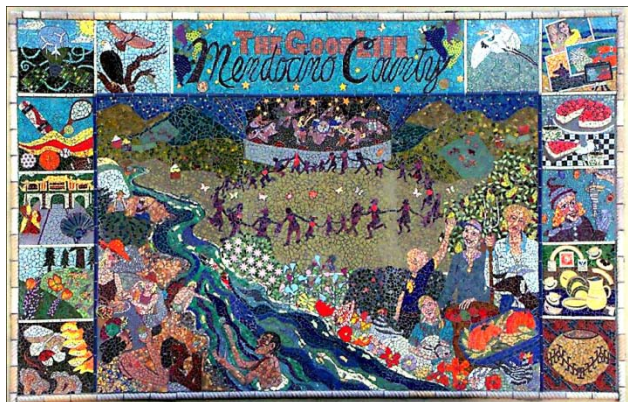


## MENDOCINO COUNTY

### THE GOOD LIFE: A COMMUNITY BUILT MOSAIC MURAL

BY ELIZABETH RAYBEE



In the center of Ukiah, Mendocino's county seat, a blank wall called out to mosaic artist Elizabeth Raybee for a mural like a blank canvas calls out to a painter. The windowless wall in question is across a busy street from the County Superior Courthouse and a popular brew pub. The building, originally a drugstore in the 1950s and now home to County Child Support Services, is on a corner that is effectively the center of town in the center of the County. Several years ago, Tom Montesonti, then a director for the Developmental Disabilities Board (a multi-county entity), told Raybee that he'd like to see one of her murals there, and this spring, Tom retired from county service right in time to assist Elizabeth in helping the community build one. Raybee, who had worked on community-built mosaic projects in San Francisco, San Diego and Breckenridge, Colorado, saw the CAC's [Creating Public Value](#) Program as the perfect vehicle to jump-start such an effort close to home, bringing more color and life to Ukiah.

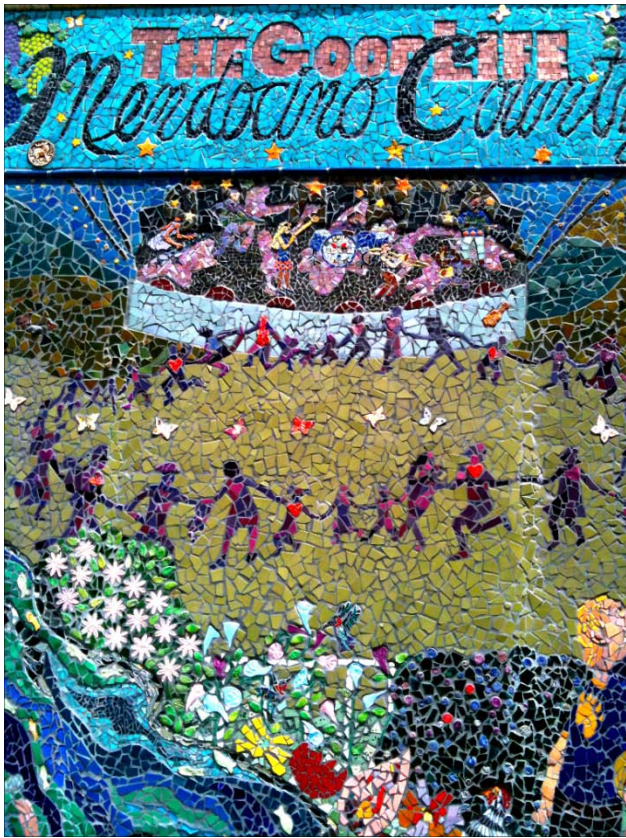
Securing permission to use the desired wall was a long, uncharted journey. Mendocino County has no commission or committee charged with making such decisions. The City of Ukiah has a

planning commission, charged with overseeing advertising, but not choosing art—besides, this was a county building. So, after a year's worth of phone calls to and meetings with supervisors, commissioners, county counsel, and many letters of support later, it was determined that permission was needed from workers in the building, the Ukiah Planning Commission and the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors, who approved it unanimously just two weeks before hands-on work began! It is hoped that an additional benefit of this project to the community will be the creation of a streamlined process for future public art projects.





For many years, for visitors and residents alike, the Mendocino coast was the county's art Mecca. But in the past few years, two organizations have made great strides in encouraging arts activities and building audiences inland as well: [Art Center Ukiah](#) and the [Arts Council of Mendocino County](#). Raybee found allies for the project in both organizations.



Art Center Ukiah (ACU), where Raybee volunteered as Program Director for two years, was the not-for-profit organization sponsoring the mural project. ACU began its activities three years ago, in conjunction with the neighboring co-op Corner Gallery, by launching First Friday Artwalks. The Artwalks brought together existing galleries, the Grace Hudson Museum, and several businesses featuring fine arts and local hand-crafted items, and created a very popular monthly event with hundreds of people

coming through to meet the artists, buy art, listen to live music, enjoy local wines and lively company. With the help of CAC funding, hosting the fabrication of the mosaic is ACU's largest project yet. ACU also threw "Glue & Stew," a successful fundraising dinner for the first group of the public invited to work on the mural.

Through a Get Arts in the Schools Program (GASP) grant from the Arts Council of Mendocino County, Raybee and two interns brought the mosaic project to three local elementary schools for three sessions each. The third graders at Oak Manor and the after-school third through fifth grade kids at Calpella School helped cut out and then glaze fish, flowers, leaf, sheep, stars, guitars, berries and other tiles for use in the "Good Life" mosaic. Kids in the Special Education program of Nakomis School produced mosaic flowers and houses on mesh that were then worked into the mural. Approximately eighty children participated in Raybee's mural through GASP, a program of the Arts Council of Mendocino County that provides thousands of students per year with arts enrichment workshops and performances through grants to professional artists.





The CPV grant covered payment for the lead artist, administrative costs, and for four interns—Adrian James, Neisa Johnson, Amethyst Raybee and Sarah Reith. Raybee feels that training local young people, currently faced with a high unemployment rate, was one of the most important aspects of the project. Montesonti assisted with the interns, ranging in age from seventeen through thirty-three, working in Raybee's Potter Valley studio twice a week for ten weeks, transforming her original sketches into the 10' by 16' paint-by-number like, multi-panel shape that it needed to be in for public participation.



The interns learned to transform ideas into images—creating the two foot square pictures

framing the central image—each square highlighting something special about Mendocino County from mushrooms to hawks, redwood trees, coastal beaches, hand-spun wool and alternative energy. They learned to choose and attach tiles and instruct others in helping to complete their vision. Learning when to accept the stylistic differences that come out in collaborative projects, versus when to pull misplaced tiles and make corrections if the original vision is lost, was not always easy, but it was discussed and exercised.

The interns, with Raybee and Montesonti, completed one side panel, so they could learn to work the tiles not only with the mesh and glue, but to thin-set the mesh to the panels and to grout. They prepared all the ceramic and glass tiles needed, moved the entire project to the Art Center, set it up for public participation, and helped hang an exhibit of twenty-five contemporary mosaic artists at ACU to compliment and contextualize the project.

The community-built portion took over one hundred afternoon and evening hours over a two and a half week period, which included Mothers' Day and May's First Friday Artwalk. In addition to shifts by several visiting mosaic artists, there were always at least three of the core group there to instruct and assist whomever came by to help... and come they did! Some got coaxed through the door "for a minute" and stayed for hours, returning days later with friends. Classes of teenage boys came from the City of 10,000 Buddhas, a local Buddhist monastery and school, getting special permission from the school to remove their ties while they worked. A local Brownie

Troupe not only worked on the mosaic together, but donated one hundred dollars of their cookie money towards materials. Kids stopped by with their parents after ballet classes to join local officials, Raybee's mosaic students, DJs, doctors and French and Japanese tourists in gluing tiles. Some placed a piece or two and many put in several shifts, discovering a possible new hobby or direction for their art. Over 450 individuals from age 3 to 89 joined the community effort. Many local businesses provided additional funding and donated materials, scaffolding, and expertise in installation.



Describing the June 3 unveiling and months since then, Raybee says, “About thirty umbrellas briefly crowded the sidewalk for the official speeches—it was so unseasonably cold with pouring rain! But every time I go to town since then, I’m stopped by people in shops, galleries and the library to tell me how appreciative they are of the colorful change I helped bring to Ukiah; of how proud they are to have worked on it, or how much more detail

they notice each time they see it. I’ve gotten many emails and calls expressing thanks and joy. I’m so happy to have brought people together for such a positive group effort!”

*All photos by E. Raybee.*

This mural project is a successful collaboration between the Arts Council of Mendocino Arts Council and Art Center Ukiah. Arts Council of Mendocino County receives funding from the California Arts Council’s [State-Local Partnership Program](#) (SLPP) which supports county arts councils. SLPP is managed by Rob Lautz, ([rlautz@cac.ca.gov](mailto:rlautz@cac.ca.gov)). Art Center Ukiah received a grant from the [Creating Public Value Program](#) (CPV), which supports art organizations in rural and underserved communities and is managed by Lucero Arellano ([larellano@cac.ca.gov](mailto:larellano@cac.ca.gov)).